

This month marks a year since the global pandemic drastically changed our lives here in the U.S. We continue to grapple with the toll it has taken on our lives. Many are reflecting on how this disorienting year has changed us and our organizations. Cultural anthropologists would refer to this year as a “liminal experience.” According to Laura Empson and Jennifer Howard-Grenville, [How Has the Past Year Changed You and Your Organization?](#) Liminal experiences are disturbing and disruptive, but they also represent potent opportunities for reflection, discovery, and even reinvention.” As we return to the office, we will each carry the weight of our individual pandemic experience. Here are a few steps to consider as we return to a post-pandemic world:

- Emerge Gradually--Allow for opportunities to integrate and reflect as employees adjust to the post-pandemic world.
- Identify what to retain and what to discard--Identify long-established cultural practices and beliefs and identify others that were developed in response to the crisis. Determine what to keep, what to let go of.
- Don't lose the liminal altogether--Play with the possibilities.

Recognize that as we move closer to returning to work in our campus offices, employees may experience varying degrees of anxiety. A management consultation with an EAO counselor can provide you with more tips and strategies for having these discussions and setting expectations.

## Preventing Employee Burnout for the Duration of COVID-19 (and beyond)

Do you think your team or coworkers are more tired, less motivated or struggling to stay focused? These are just a few of the hallmark signs of employee burnout.

The causes and impacts of employee burnout, however, are evolving. What was once discussed as a phenomenon largely afflicting millennials seems to have become much more pervasive, impacting all ages and types of workers as the COVID-19 pandemic stretches into its second year in the U.S.

While the future remains uncertain, one thing is clear: [Employee burnout is a reality employers can't afford to ignore.](#)

Although [the concept of occupational burnout originated in the 1970s](#), the medical community has long argued about how to define it. In 2019 the World Health Organization included burnout in its International Classification of Diseases, describing it as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.” This language acknowledged that burnout is more than just an employee problem; it's an *organizational* problem that requires an organizational solution.

When analyzing the real causes of burnout, we have been approaching the problem from the wrong angle. According to Christina Maslach of the University of California, Berkeley, Susan E. Jackson of Rutgers, and Michael Leiter of Deakin University, burnout has six main causes:

- |                                   |                                  |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • Unsustainable workload          | • Lack of a supportive community |
| • Perceived lack of control       | • Lack of fairness               |
| • Insufficient rewards for effort | • Mismatched values and skills   |

While these are organizational issues, we typically prescribe *self-care* as the cure for burnout. This puts the burden on the individual employees. “Let's just recommend more yoga, wellness tech, meditation apps, and subsidized gym memberships — that'll fix it,” we say. But those are tools for improving well-being. When it comes to preventing burnout specifically, they won't be effective. We need upstream interventions, not downstream tactics.



Noticing and taking steps to mitigate employee burnout is an important practice. Burnout can happen to anyone, including supervisors and those in upper management. Employers who ignore burnout often encounter unusually high job dissatisfaction and employee turnover rates. Here are a few signs of employee burnout to keep an eye out for:

- Lack of interest or enthusiasm
- Moving slower than normal
- Disinterest in conversation
- Disengagement
- Exhibiting a negative attitude
- Frequent tardiness or absences
- Decline in productivity
- Producing lower quality work

You may also find that employee burnout can cause long-term losses. Burned-out employees are more likely to take PTO and call in sick during busy workweeks. They're also often looking for other jobs and may resign with little to no notice. That means learning to handle employee burnout effectively can save you time, money and mental strain.

## **Tips for Stopping Workplace Burnout in its Tracks**

### **Create more flexibility in scheduling and encourage time off.**

The ability for employees to take time off is critical to wellbeing and it's more important during difficult times. Employees say that more flexibility in scheduling and working remotely and using PTO, could help to reduce burnout. Employees also behave in accordance with company culture, so it's important that managers model the behavior they want to see. If they're not, use this opportunity to address the issues holding them back.

### **Reach out**

Employee burnout isn't always obvious. By asking questions like "How do you feel about your job overall?" and "Do you have everything you need to do your job well?" you can find out if employees are feeling burned out and take steps to mitigate it. If you suspect an employee may be experiencing burnout, request a one-on-one meeting. In a private meeting, share your concerns and ask them if they're feeling unmotivated or overwhelmed. Encourage them to be honest. Even if they're not yet burned-out, talking over common employee burnout signs with a manager can help them self-evaluate and prevent any issues that may come up. Avoid making assumptions on what the employee needs. Once you've established a rapport, you can work together to find a solution to the problem. Possible solutions to employee burnout might include giving them time off, reassigning one of their projects to someone else or moving them to a different team or department.

### **Distribute workloads carefully**

Another way to prevent employee burnout is to be thoughtful about how you distribute tasks and assignments. Giving a single employee or team more projects or tasks than they can complete before deadlines can cause frustration and unnecessary stress. Check-in regularly with your team members to find out how they're handling their current schedule. If anyone is overwhelmed, consider reassigning a task to another employee or offer to help them handle it yourself. Treating your team with respect and consideration can go a long way toward preventing burnout.

### **Provide workplace variety**

If an employee excels at a particular task, you may be tempted to assign them the same task all the time. Doing the same thing at work for long periods of time can negatively affect an employee's energy levels and enthusiasm. Try giving your employees opportunities to work on a variety of tasks whenever possible. Create a rotating schedule so that no one handles the same problems or issues for months in a row. Ideally, by listening to your team's feedback, you'll be able to assign tasks that they excel at and enjoy.



## Assess your management style

Managers can sometimes unintentionally contribute to burnout by using a management style that causes employees stress or frustration. If you notice symptoms of burnout among your team, take time to consider your management tactics and compare them to the behavior of other managers in your organization. For example, if you frequently contact team members outside of work hours, assign tasks before the previous ones are finished or show bias to certain employees (even if it's unconscious bias), consider adjusting your management style. Employee Assistance Services offers management consultation to help managers and supervisors identify their management style and provide strategies to strengthen the manager-employee relationship.

## Take mental health seriously

The final step in mitigating employee burnout is to make prioritizing mental health a part of your team's culture. Employee Assistance Services provides free, confidential, short-term counseling and directs employees to additional resources and tools to enhance their mental wellness.

Nearly three-quarters of workers feel employee burnout has gotten worse since this time last year. No doubt, COVID-19 has fanned the flames of some troubling workplace trends, from burnout to ghosting or quitting without notice, and the erosion of workplace culture. Luckily, employers can take steps to change course and provide employees with much-needed support. Awareness of the employee experience can help you develop an action plan to mitigate feelings of burnout, prevent costly churn and protect workers from burnout in a post-pandemic future.

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Resources, promotions, newsletters and more! Go to [mylifematters.com](https://mylifematters.com) and sign in with Bucky2.

LifeMatters offers supportive sessions at no cost for employees to share their challenges, ask questions and focus on strategies to enhance coping and build resilience. Please share this information with employees as you deem appropriate.

### Delivering Difficult News

**Wednesday, April 7, 2021, 11:30 a.m. -- 12:30 p.m. (CDT)**

To register, simply click on the link: <https://mailchi.mp/empathia/delivering-difficult-news-webinar-1>

Have you ever wondered how to break bad news? How do you tell an employee's family member that they have been in an accident? Delivering difficult news is something no one ever wants to do or feels like they are good at it. After making numerous crisis notifications, we've been there. In this webinar, we are going to pull back the curtain and share easy, yet powerful techniques. You will learn:

- What loved ones ask
- The CARE Model
- How to say it
- Sample scripts

We will approach this sensitive subject by teaching our own four-step model that will prepare you to deliver that difficult news with compassion and confidence.